

The Earth as a Resource for Art and Creativity

Mercy A. Okafor

*Department of Fine and Applied Arts,
Federal Polytechnic,
Oko, Anambra State, Nigeria*

Doi:10.5901/jesr.2013.v3n5p87

Abstract

The earth is the greatest resource base for art and creativity. Over the ages, it has provided man with materials used to create and build great monuments, objects, carved images, etc, that have served for utilitarian, religious, socio-economic and aesthetic purposes. From the caredwellings of the early man, the Great Pyramids in Egypt, the Stonehenge, to the skyscrapers in big cities, the earth provided the wood, stone, iron in conjunction with old and new technologies. But man has failed to realize and appreciate the great potentials the earth could and has provided for his sustainable living, art and creativity. The relationship of the earth to the aesthetic and creative mind of man has been relegated to a low level that man has failed to realize that the earth will always generate new ideas and initiatives to solve human problems. Inspite of the challenges of the earth's degradation by man's activities, and lack of best practices and resourceful programs to regenerate the earth, the environment still is able to provide resources for art, creativity and sustainable development.

Keywords: Art, Creativity, Nature, Resources, Uli/Nsibidi Designs.

1. Introduction

Throughout the evolutionary history of mankind, the earth and nature have had a lot to influence man and impact on his creative mind. The lessons learnt from nature by philosophers, scientists and technologists, have undoubtedly inspired the conception of ideas, symbols and the nature of many inventions.

Man, as the foremost and greatest product from the resources of the earth, is made up of the mineral, vegetable and water elements of the earth. From his environment, man has looked upon his physical body as possessing great power and energy in itself, and also a creative mind to solve his problems. Through the use of the saw, the swimming of an axe, the lifting of the hammer, man has created many life's necessities and nearly all of life's luxuries, all from the resources of the earth.

The ingenuity of man has allowed him to tap his creative energies from his environment and nature. As humans, "we make our own environment by shaping the world around us to suit our needs" (Getlein, 2002:70). But nature as being different from this manufactured, environment has often influence and has been addressed through art. Getlein, (72) maintains that "nature has been more than a subject for art; it has also served as a material for art. As a subject for art, artists have recorded different nature scenes, in different styles, techniques and attitudes. The Impressionist artists tried to capture the momentary scenes in nature through their colourful paintings.

As a material for art, nature has allowed artists to recognize a wide variety of naturalistic forms which they experience and adapt as being in harmony with their feelings and attitudes. The

colours in nature – blue sky, green foliage, the red/violet sunsets, the textured barks of trees and stones, birds and other forms of nature, all relate to the appearances of the visible world around us. The most renowned Renaissance artist, Leonardo da Vinci, developed the Renaissance synthesis of art and science in his different drawings. Thus, his artistic endeavours are characterized as investigative and experimental. His drawings reflect his passionate interest in the origins of life (his anatomical drawings of the foetus in the womb), and in discovering scientific explanations for natural phenomena. (Adams, 2001, pp 279-80). Stokstad (1995), saw Leonardo's interest in Mathematics and the natural world. The compiled volumes of his detailed drawings and notes on anatomy, botany, geology, meteorology, architectural designs and mechanics, attest to his ingenuity. For example, from the birds in flight, he designed the first prototype for the building of an aircraft which was eventually adopted by aircraft engineers centuries later.

2. Resources of the Earth for Art

The first action that man took when he transformed from nomadic life to a sheltered life, was to provide himself with shelter. In the caves of Southern France and Northern Spain, we have witnessed the birth of that basic characteristic of self preservation that has made man master of his environment. The human capability for survival made him provide utilitarian objects, though crude, for self preservation from the harsh environment.

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary describes resource as, "a supply of something that a country, an organization or a person has and can use, especially to increase their wealth: the exploitation of minerals and other natural resources...." From the heat and light of the sun, man found power in friction. By this simple process, he was enable to originate and produce fire. With fire, he kept himself warm and developed the techniques of pottery.

3. Pottery

Nearly every culture that has existed, has practiced the art of pottery (in modern term, ceramics), each with its basic techniques. Pottery involves making objects from clay, a naturally occurring earth substance. (Getlein, 279). Through the basic techniques of pinching, coiling and slabbing, the plastic nature of clay has enabled man form pots, storage jars from clay. Ancient cities in the past were built with clay (as bricks), and contributed in other built up environments. The creative mind of the potter has developed overtime alongside new technologies and techniques, backed by the inspiration from his physical, cultural, historical and religious backgrounds. Wares are now glazed with glazing materials from the earth to produce ground breaking designs in varied shapes and forms. Modern technologies in firing clay has evolved from the primitive techniques of sunbaking clay and open firing to the use of the kiln.

4. Iron, Bronze, Precious Stones and Gems

The urge to explore further for materials found in the belly of the earth, has made man to harness many elements in their natural state. The possibilities of new technologies have led man to produce objects for utilitarian and aesthetic purposes. Metals such as iron, aluminum and steel, were melted and used to create other practical objects in unlimited forms. The mining of iron, bronze, gems – gold, silver, diamonds, etc, have offered man the opportunity to artistically transform them into jewelries that have beautified mankind. The bronze sculptures of Ife and Benin flourished and focused on exquisitely modeled memorial heads which has till date remained sacred to the people in their religious life (Stokstad, p.911).

5. Wood Carvings

Before man found iron, wood was the most available material found in nature. Wood as a natural resource has been used to form hunting tools, building fire to provide heat, building houses to shelter man from the environment. The oldest surviving art works found in Africa were wood sculptures. The formal inventiveness and expressive power of African sculptures have been sources of inspiration for European artists in their representational artforms (Stokstad, 912). The abstractions inherent in the African sculptures have produced a new generation of art movements and artists in Europe.

6. Art and Creativity

Art as a means of self expression, has been explored by many in several ways. It is not only a mark of individual genius, but also an expression of great social, religious and political force. What Genesis is to the biblical account of the fall and redemption of man, early cave art is to the history of his intelligence, imagination and creative power. In this tremendous fact of abstractions, images and symbols, these artist – hunters were able to capture their experiences, and gave meaning to their imaginative concepts of having power over the animals they intend to hunt and kill. Their artistic sophistication notwithstanding, their art gave us an insight into their extraordinary observation and memory, magical and religious implications. Their artworks that have survived, represent ideas which the prehistoric man has objectified.

Art is a vital and persistent aspect of human experience, with a natural impulse to build. Its study teaches about the creative expressions of the past and present, the style, materials and techniques. It is valued by the culture in which it was made, and its significance based on the religious, social, economic and psychological life of the people (Adams, 2001).

Art in its entirety is creativity and concept, associated with an environment – traditional or modern. To Arens (2006), “creativity involves combining two or more previously unconnected objects or ideas into something new. By following it, people can improve their ability to unearth possibilities in human potentials”. To him, the creative process involves a standard procedure used to discover original ideas and reorganize existing concepts in new ways. Everyone needs creativity; from the scientist down to the Business Executive, creativity is needed in their professional practice to open up the channels of observation, imagination and inspiration. For artists, visual creativity is in their domain, being “the most sophisticated form of human communication shaped by the social context in which they find expression” (Stokstad; 24). The visual expressions in specialized areas such as industrial design, architecture, engineering, and artworks that deal with images – painting, sculpture, photography, all fulfill practical purposes of recording, commemorating the past and giving tangible forms to feelings and ideas.

As a human activity, art has been inspired by the simplicity of nature; the harmony of forms, grace of design, regularity and symmetry of petals, methods of unfoldment of flowers, barks of trees, all beautiful in their regularity and texture, yet permitting an almost infinite variations of individual form. Thus, the earth becomes an art gallery, and displayed in it are the art and crafts of nature, always in motion, constantly changing in size, shape and colour. It is three dimensional art, and must be viewed, just as man-made works are viewed.

Nature has inspired every artist, and each has been led to the discovery of the possibilities of man's mental and creative powers. It is the only power in the universe within the control of man that is wholly and completely unlimited. In its creative mechanism, the mental powers of man is not bound in its physical applications, by time and space, physical limitations and dimensional qualities of matter. It is not bound by the traditions of the past, the possibilities of the present, or the feasibilities of the future.

7. Art and Symbolism in Nature

In our visual environment today, nature has generated symbols to explain and decipher many abstract concepts. Man thinks in symbols. Symbolism is as prevalent today as it has been to man through the ages. Symbols possess an esoteric language, a secret code, which the viewer must decipher and whose meaning he must unlock. Thus, a symbol is always the outgrowth of a realization, from within or without man's environment.

As a result of thought and reflection on a given theme or concept, a picture or drawing is invented which expresses the figurative image of the concept. In this manner the symbol serves as a hieroglyph expressing the imagined idea. Certain symbols from nature would represent specific concepts and ideas. Colours, birds, animals, are used to define these concepts that are abstract in nature. For example, the Dove signifies Peace and Love; the cross represents Salvation; the scale represents Justice; the Lion represents Power and Strength. Different colours have their own meanings; white communicates Purity and Light; Black absorbs all colours and buries light, thereby symbolizing death, humiliation and mourning; Red is the colour of blood, representing bloodshed, war, guilt and the lower passions; Purple has been a distinguished symbol of Royalty, Dignity and Honour; Green is the colour of plant and growth symbolizing hope and resurrection.

In pre-colonial Igboland, the Uli and Nsibidi designs found precise expression in the hands of the traditional artists. The Igbo women's ingenuity was shown in the manipulation of the primitive brush to produce many of the coloured Uli designs (Basden, 1982). The Uli design was a style employed in a complex system of body design, (personal ornamentation) and mural painting using a vast catalogue of signs, symbols and patterns, to form a distinctive representation of the Igbo universe (Glendora, 1995). Nature colours were used as part of a descriptive approach to nature and environment. Pigments, as the basis of colour, are coloured powders made from organic substances – plant and animal matter, or inorganic substances-minerals and precious stones. Such substances like the local colours of Ufie (red), Odo (yellow), Nzu (white chalk), Nchara (brown) and Uri (indigo) were directly sourced from the earth. The motifs were taken from history, mythology, inspired by nature and everyday living.

The Nsibidi design as a system also originated from the Igbos. It is a system of motifs associated with the Ekpe male secret society, and was used to send messages. Its symbols often stand for social relationships – love, marriage, divorce, powerful emotions, using leaf, tortoise, mirror, spiral lines and other shapes. (National Museum of African Art). Oloidi, art historian and critic, describes Okpu Eze's use of the Nsibidi symbols in "Temple of Power". The artist used the symbols sourced from his culture to bring profound meaning, history and intellectualism, to his sculptural expressions (Okpu Eze, 1992).

Over time, these symbols that were inspired by nature have been explored, refined, classified, simplified and sometimes standardized, to be adopted by a group of people – nations, humanitarian organizations, families and corporate organizations.

8. Conclusion

The earth, nature and environment have been a great resource for art and creativity. Art, unlike nature is a human creation. It is the many ways man expresses himself, communicates and adapts to his environment.

He uses the resources of the earth in different dimensions of living. For as long as man lives, the earth will continue to provide him with tools, materials and inspirations to express himself to the fullest. It is up to man to sustain and preserve the earth and the environment from the numerous negative activities of man. Environmental degradation depletes the natural resource of the earth in so far as the beautiful patterns of nature may one day be erased from the face of the earth. Therefore, the sustainability of the earth becomes man's priority. All the same, nature will

always engage our attentions, imagination and intelligence through the experiences we have in response to it.

References

- Adams, L. S. (2001). *A History of Western Art*, 3rd ed. McGraw Hill, New York. Pp. 13, 279-80.
- Arens, w.f. (2006) *Contemporary Advertising*, 10th edition. McGraw Hill/Irwin Companies Inc. New York.
- Basden, G. T. (1983). *Among the Igbos of Nigeria*. University Publishing Co., London. Pp 165-169.
- Getlein, M. (2002). *Living with Art*, 6th ed. McGraw Hill, New York. Pp. 70-72, 279.
- Glendora Review, 1995. "Conversation of Two Masters". *Journal of African Quarterly on the Arts*. Publisher – Glendora International (Nigeria) Limited. Pp 25-31.
- 'The Poetic of Line', October 22, 1997 – April 26, 1998. Catalogue – Seven Artists of the Nsukka School. National Museum of African Art, Washington DC.
- Oloidi, Ola (1992). 'Okpu Eze's Art: Synthesis of Creativity, Meaning and Ideology'. In *Okpu Eze: New Dimensions – Present of the Past*. Exhibition Catalogue. National Museum, Lagos.
- Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, (2010). 8th ed., Oxford University Press.
- Stokstad, M. (1995). *Art History*, Vol. 2. Prentice Hall, Inc., and Abrams, H. Inc., USA. Pp 24, 911-912.

